Fairbury's Zouave Cadets

By: Dale C. Maley
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John S. Scibird was born in Fountain County, Indiana, in 1830. His family eventually moved to Bloomington, Illinois. John married Miss Lydia A. Underwood from Ohio. He owned and operated a photography business in Bloomington. John and his wife had eight children. The oldest child was a son, Joseph H. Scibird, who was born in 1840.

In the years following the War of 1812, many northern states discontinued their militias. In their place, units of volunteer militia organized themselves. These units, often drawn from members of society, elected their officers, adopted their own uniforms and customs, and generally financed themselves. Well-drilled and commanded units could petition for recognition by their state government. If their state government approved the petition, their officers would be issued commissions by the Governor. The troops were also permitted access to the state's armories and munitions stores, all while maintaining their otherwise independent character. Nevertheless, such volunteer militia companies of this period – despite forming a nucleus around which a state could build and expand its military forces in an emergency – are characterized by historians as "more fraternal than martial." They placed greater emphasis on drill and ceremony than on battlefield tactics.

The National Guard Cadets of Chicago was formed as a volunteer militia company on March 19, 1856, under commanding officer Captain Joseph R. Scott. After three years, however, its strength sat at just fifteen men.

Elmer Ellsworth, the commander of the Rockford Greys militia company, took a different approach with his volunteer militia. Ellsworth had previously been informed about the French Zouave military customs by his fencing instructor, Doctor Charles A. De Villiers. Mr. Ellsworth introduced his Rockford men to drills inspired by those used by the French Zouave units.

In 1859, the Chicago National Guard cadets saw the Rockford unit perform their Zouave inspired drills. They were so impressed with the uniforms and the drill performance that they offered Elmer Ellsworth immediate command of their Chicago unit. Elmer accepted the offer and took over the Chicago unit. He renamed it the United States Zouave Cadets.

On July 4, 1859, the United States Zouave Cadets – now 46 members strong – first publicly appeared in their new Zouave uniforms and executed the unique Franco-Algerian Zouave drill in front of Chicago's Tremont Hall. With a training schedule of three evenings per week, the United States Zouave Cadets established a reputation for parade ground excellence. One observer described their drill performance as "unsurpassed this side of West Point." The United States Zouave Cadets saw their biggest audience, estimated to be 70,000 in number, the following September. This vast audience was attending the seventh annual United States Agricultural Society Fair in Chicago.

The popularity of the Chicago Zouave Cadets prompted the creation of Zouave cadet units across the United States. A Bloomington Zouave Cadet group was formed. Joseph H. Scibird became their recruiting officer.

The Civil War started on April 12, 1861, when the Confederates bombarded Union soldiers at Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

In June of 1862, Joseph H. Scibird's Zouave cadet unit went to Springfield and became part of the 19th Illinois Infantry Regiment. Joseph rose to the rank of Major in the Union army during the war. Near the end of the war, he married Frances Clark. After the war, Joseph returned to living in Bloomington.

In 1876, John S. Scibird moved to Fairbury and bought the Blade newspaper. His son, Joseph, also moved to Fairbury. Joseph and Frances Scibird had one son, Albert Clark Scibird, born in 1869. Albert was nicknamed Bertie Scibird.

Joseph H. Scibird formed the Fairbury Zouave Cadets. This unit was a group of forty boys who were ten to fourteen years old. Their uniforms consisted of red pants, blue shirts, red caps with blue tops, white stockings, and shoes. They had toy guns made under the direction of Major Scibird. The toy guns had pine stocks and tin barrels. Major Scibird's son Bertie was a Private in this group.

The Fairbury Zouave Cadets performed drill exercises at Fairbury public events. They performed at the Fairbury Fair. In October of 1878, Governor Shelby M. Cullom gave a speech at Fairbury. The Zouave Cadets performed a drill exercise for the Illinois Governor.

In 1878, the author of a new Livingston County history book, William Le Baron, was performing research for the new book in the Fairbury area. He was so impressed by the Zouave Cadets he made mention of them in his new history book. Le Baron included the names and ranks of all forty boys that served in the Zouave Cadet unit.

Unfortunately, there are no known photographs of the Fairbury Zouave Cadet unit. They must have been very impressive to see in their colorful French Zouave style uniforms. The uniforms of the Fairbury unit were probably as bright as the uniforms of the Chicago Zouave unit. Colorized photographs of the Chicago Zouave cadet unit have survived and are available for review.

Major Joseph H. Scibird died at age forty-nine in 1889. He had severe asthma in the last few years of his life. He was buried in Bloomington's cemetery.

The historian, Le Baron, noted the Fairbury Zouave Cadets performed their drill exercises with perfect military precision. He recounted that older soldiers could learn much from their maneuvers. Le Baron pointed out the country need not fear a danger from either an

enemy from home or abroad because of how well prepared the young men were to become great soldiers.

Fairbury Zouave Cadets.

[NOTE.—*Does not belong to the Tenth Battalion, but is an independent company of small boys who are well drilled and organized, and deserve record in the military department of this work.*]

J. H. Scibird, Captain.
Thomas Baker, First Lieutenant.
Willie Van Doorn, Second Lieutenant.
Charley Rettenmayer, First Sergeant.
Harmon Gillett, Second Sergeant.
Fred Baker, Third Sergeant.
Frank Duell, Fourth Sergeant.
Fred Wright, Fifth Sergeant.

CORPORALS.

Grant McDowell.	Thos. Langabeer.
George Decker.	Henry Sweet.
Clarence Murdock.	Bruce Ambury.
Eddie Smith.	Robby Mack.

PRIVATES.

Adams, Willie.	Jones, Jasper.	Morris, Charley.
Bartlett, Harry.	Kinnear, Charley.	Nichols, Earl.
Baker, George.	Knight, Henry.	Stafford, Malcom
Burrell, U. S.	McDowell, Charley.	Scouler, Tommie.
Bryant, Willie.	McKiernan, Frank.	Scibird, Bertie.
Cramer, Willie.	McDowell, John.	Wright, Harry.
Gardner, Walter.	McCurdy, Dan.	Wright, Frank.
Hurdle, Henry.	McLean, Wilmer.	Westervelt, Emery
Jones, Willie.	McCurdy, Jacob.	

Fairbury Zouave Cadets in 1878 Livingston County History Book

Typical colorful Zouave uniforms